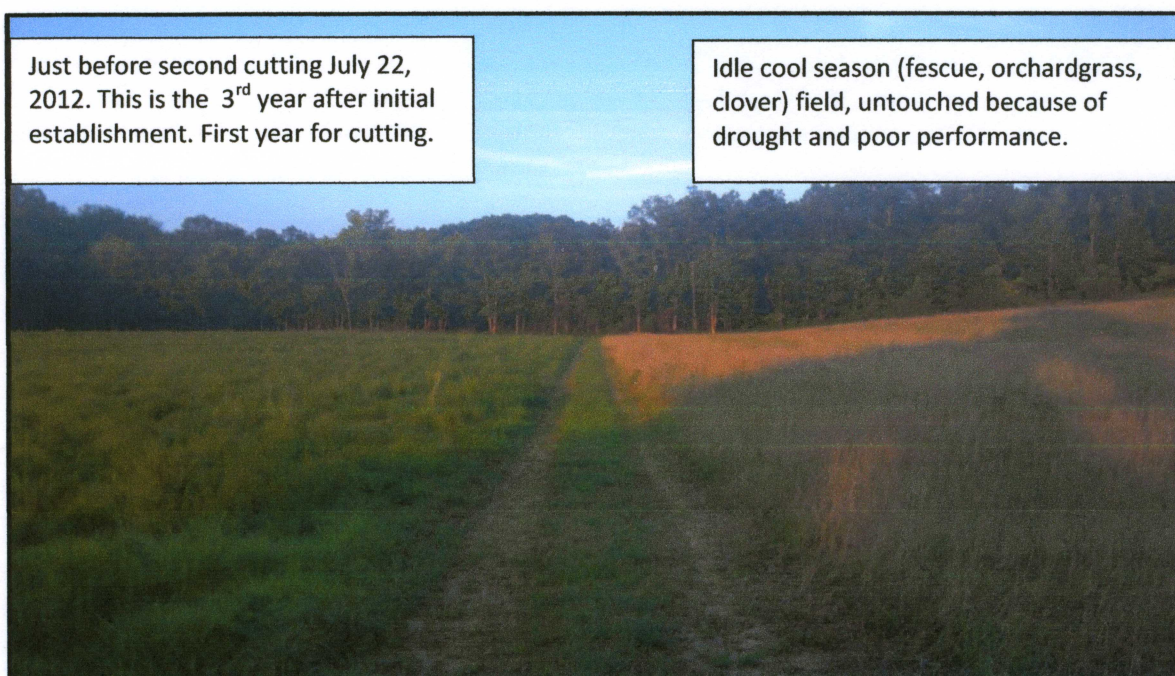


## Natives to the Rescue! Mike Gaskins, Private Land Conservationist, Eminence, MO

*"Native warm season grass hay, what's that? No, it aint that ole wild grass hay from that way back grown up field we haven't managed in years that folks talk about."*

I don't know how often I get asked that question, but bringing credibility to native warm season grass (NWSG) as a legitimate, high quality forage and superior producer has been slow going till this year. Many seem to feel that grasses from elsewhere are always better, but my NWSG hay has stood the test of horse owners who require only the best for their horses. This is the first year for cutting my NWSG (OZ70 Big bluestem, Ozark & Aldous Little bluestem) field, and with a snicker, I can say the timing of this year's drought hasn't been the best. First year's cutting is never peak production, but the quality was certainly there. And the second cutting, *YES, I said second cutting last week*, was sold nearly right out of the back of the bailer. My customer who is a barrel racer, traveling all over for events, says his horses just love it and have found very little difference between the NWSG bales and alfalfa. Coming out to pick up the hay last week, he said, "my goodness Mike, this has got to be one of the only green fields in the county".



I stopped by to visit a landowner last week to check in on a woodland project that he was doing and got to looking at a NWSG planting that he did on his own back in April 2012. In 2009, with great skepticism, he converted a fescue/CSG field to NWSG with the Missouri Dept. of Conservation Landowner Assistance Program, to give the native thing a try on my recommendation. Of course, I was touting all the benefits to wildlife, and to the producer if used correctly, but throughout the first year he frantically kept calling me out to the farm asking if I was sure things were going well. I would point to the little 2 inch tall grass plants and say your fine. "If you say so Mike", with a doubting laugh". A few years later, he was bailing more high quality hay than he thought he could even get his cutter through.

This same producer called me last week, "Mike, you've got to get over here and see this". "What's wrong", I asked. "Its not what's wrong Mike, it's that the NWSG field I planted back in April is the only, I mean, the only other green field on the farm. I thought for sure the drought was gonna do it in."



## July 2012



Native warm-season grasses (big bluestem, Indian grass, little bluestem) established 2009. Notice brown weeds in the firebreak & green native grass to the left.

Cool-season grass (orchardgrass, fescue) field completely brown after 1<sup>st</sup> hay cutting.

Native warm-season grasses are well adapted to Missouri's climate and support a variety of wildlife. In addition, native warm-season grasses can provide excellent forage for livestock during the summer months when cool-season grasses are dormant. Native grasses are attractive to wildlife species, because they evolved with it over the last 10,000 years. Native warm-season grasses are especially important this year because the insects so important to broods of birds, whether they be quail, turkey or meadowlark, are only found in any number where there is still green vegetation.

Recent research at the University of Tennessee has demonstrated that cattle do well on native warm-season grasses during the summer months, commonly posting gains of between 1.5 and 2.0 pounds per day on steers. Bred heifers typically gain between 1.0 and 1.5 pounds daily on these grasses. Blends of big bluestem and indiangrass provide better daily gains, but switchgrass and Eastern gamagrass can support heavier stocking rates.

Programs through your local Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA and the Department of Conservation can help defray much of the expenses of converting portions of your pasture or hayland to native grasses.

Go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZQXF6Sq3o> for videos which provide basic instructions for establishing native grasses.



Big bluestem and Indian grass established in April 2012. Good site preparation and good first year growth during the severe 2012 drought.